DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 218 952 FL 013 042

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TITLE Language Learning in Schools.
INSTITUTION Council for Cultural Cooperation, Strasbourg (France).
REPORT NO CC-GP4-(81)-32
PUB DATE 7 Dec 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the conference "Across the Threshold towards Multilingual Europe--Vivre le Multilinguisme Europeen" (Strasbourg, France, February 23-26, 1982). For related documents, see FL 013 041-046.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Communicative Competence (Languages); Curriculum Development; *Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Experimental Programs; Foreign Countries; International Educational Exchange; Language Attitudes; Material Development; *Second Language Instruction; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Europe (West)

ABSTRACT

Experimentation in the field of foreign language teaching and learning is underway in several countries under the auspices of the Council of Europe. A review of projects shows that many ways of introducing the communicative approach to language teaching have been tried. Experts from the Council for Cultural Cooperation visited member European countries in the late 1970s to accomplish the following objectives: (1) to talk with ministerial authorities on educational matters, (2) to have contact with the national project leaders and participants, and (3) to visit classrooms and observe learning activities. These visits provided the basis for an overview of developments and a summary of problems. Some of the problems involved the effort to strike a balance between the communicative model and the requirements of existing syllabi, the lack of suitable materials, and a feeling on the part of teachers that they do not have the active support of administrators. A meeting of project leaders recommended the formation of a group to deal with materials development, to prepare a study on evaluation and assessment, and to provide guidelines for the composition of intermediate texts. A more positive attitude toward teaching and learning foreign languages marks the efforts of the Council at the present time. (AMH)

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ED218952

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg, 7 December 1981 CC-GP4 (81) 32

COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

CONFERENCE

"ACROSS THE THRESHOLD TOWARDS MULTILINGUAL EUROPE -
VIVRE LE MULTILINGUISME EUROPEEN"

(Strasbourg, 23-26 February 1982)

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

by

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LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

When I was at high school in the forties in the little Hanseatic town of Visby on the Baltic island of Gotland, I very seldom heard the foreign languages we studied - German, English and French, in that order - spoken in the classroom. Not even by the teachers, who in any case were often denied the opportunity of visiting the countries whose languages they were teaching. In the evenings, though, one could tune in to foreign radio stations and pick up the languages; French language broadcasts, however, were more seldom available, because French transmitters were evidently aimed at some other point of the compass. But fading and jamming, and above all lack of practice in understanding the spoken word fairly soon resulted in a reversion to the silent reading passage that had been set for homework. For the study of printed texts, understandably enough, occupied a paramount place together with translation and grammar practice. It was not until after matriculation, and after eight years' German, six years' English and five years' French, that I first ventured outside Scandinavia and made my way to Paris, where I found that my capacity for understanding the spoken language and expressing myself by means of it fell woefully short of my relatively wide familiarity with French literature and my ability to translate an unseen text.

Perhaps some of you will recognise from this description your own linguistic learning situation. But sooner or later, one way or another, we all acquired the ability to both understand and use one or more foreign language without any communicative approach having been employed in our schools. So is there really any need for dramatic changes to language teaching in schools?

You all know the answer to this question. There are many reasons why changes are needed, but those reasons are not yet sufficiently known or accepted in all circles to lead to the desirable or necessary changes in language teaching. It is proposed that the arguments in favour of change be discussed among other things during this afternoon's group work.

As to the proficiency of our generation, there is reason to suppose that many of us acquired the ability to understand the spoken language and to use it ourselves in spite of, rather than as a result of, teaching based on the forms of the language and not on its functions.

I am not in any way gunning for the authors of the curricula used in the thirties and forties, nor do I seek to cast aspersions on the teachers of that time who tried to achieve the curricula aims which were laid down and which were doubtless adequate in relation to contemporary needs. Who at that time could have foreseen the immensely rapid changes that were to take place during a few post-war decades, or the novel demands that realities would make on the individual, for example in terms of greater proficiency in foreign languages and not least as regards the capacity for verbal communication?

For it would seem true to say that partial or complete ignorance of foreign languages today tends only too often to impede or preclude desirable commercial, industrial, political, cultural and social contacts across language boundaries. Therefore, vigorous efforts are needed from politicians,

administrators, educational authors, teachers, teacher trainers, students, researchers and prospective employers in order for young persons in the 80s and 90s to be better equipped than the great majority of earlier generations to cope with the needs of tomorrow. This is not a purely linguistic requirement; it also involves societal aspects.

The visits to the member countries during the last two years have left us with the firm impression that decision-making authorities are increasingly aware of the importance of foreign language skills and that they are anxious to test the possibilities of enhancing the effect of foreign-language teaching, whether in the form of instruction in youth education or adult education.

In several member countries, at the instance of various parties, experimentation in the field of foreign-language teaching and learning is at present going on under the auspices of the Council of Europe. These experiments are of various dimensions in different countries, they have reached different stages of development, but what they all have in common is that they constitute national applications of a Modern Languages Project the fundamental basis of which has been drawn up by the members of the Project Group of the Council for Cultural Co-operation.

I would like to give you some glimpses of what these efforts imply, their different directions in different countries, the problems faced by national project teams, their hopes, successes and sometimes disappointments, and the role and participation played by the CDCC Project Group at the present stage. And I will end up with a few remarks on the chances of this joint effort at innovation of modern-language teaching and learning holding its ground, and on the promise it holds up for the future of language learning, both specifically in terms of linguistic ability and generally, as a means towards better understanding between people of different nationality. In addition I will make some comments concerning the efforts which will be needed in various quarters in order for these ideas to be translated into practice.

During the first half of the seventies, before the threshold level documents were available, experiments based on the new language learning approach had been launched in several places in Europe, on a modest scale to begin with. Finland, the United Kingdom, Austria and the Federal Republic of Germany were early starters, and other countries soon followed their lead. The initiative or stimulus for the practical implementation of the theoretical ideas emerging within the Council of Europe expert group usually came from delegates or experts from the member countries, some of whom are present on this occasion. They disseminated the ideas to progressive teachers, teacher trainers or researchers in their various countries, with the result that discussion and, eventually, material production groups were set up by language teachers, usually without financial backing or any other kind of support. Sometimes this led individual teachers or groups of teachers in one or more schools to decide to test the "new" approach in the classroom.

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Other ways of introducing the new approach were successively tried, eg through the central production of new curricula and syllabi from educational authorities.

Changes in the direction of this new approach were also initiated by others, because the Council of Europe's commitment was in line with current foreign-language teaching trends. Innovations or quasi-innovations such as direct method, basic skills and core curriculum, mastery learning and the situational/notional/functional approach - the last mentioned of which eventually became a common denominator of the experiments - were tested in a bid to improve the poor motivation existing in some quarters for foreign-language studies and the unsatisfactory teaching results obtained in certain cases.

After the mid-1970s, several local or regional experiments had assumed national proportions. Towards the end of the decade, pilot projects at national level had developed into such manifold and varied activities in both primary and secondary education that there was a growing body of opinion in favour of the identification, encouragement and co-ordination of those pilot experiments in the school sector that were built on the new language learning approach. There were several reasons in favour of co-ordination measures. For example, time and money could be saved through a transnational interchange of information between projects. The central Project Group and Secretariat here in Strasbourg needed an overview of what it had initiated or encouraged and of the results obtained. Moreover, it would be possible for individual projects to receive assistance from members of the expert group and colleagues in other countries in translating the theoretical documents into classroom practicalities. As a logical response to this situation, the Council for Cultural Co-operation resolved in 1978 to instruct the CDCC Project Group to extend its responsibility to all sectors of education and, it is understood, to base its work on the foundation of the "communicative" approach. This can be said to have initiated the third stage of the Council's engagement in foreign language problems - the first being the so-called Major Language Programme of the 1960s and the second the production of the theoretical basis for a new approach in foreign-language teaching during most of the 1970s.

It was against this background that in the spring of 1979 the CDCC approached all member countries with an inquiry concerning current foreign-language teaching experimentation based on or stimulated by the Council of Europe approach. Seventeen countries were represented at the first meeting, in June 1979, of leaders responsible for pilot projects nominated by member Governments. Current experiments were presented by twelve countries. This initial meeting of leaders responsible for national pilot projects was followed by a second in June 1980 and a third in June 1981. These meetings constituted an important cohesive factor and provided good opportunities for the interchange of experience and for the discussion of what were often found to be common problems. Already at the meeting held in June 1979, several national representatives announced their readiness to welcome a visiting group of experts to compare notes. So between September 1979 and May 1981 Finland, Austria, the Federal Republic of Germany (Hesse), Ireland, England, Portugal, Scotland, France, Denmark, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland were visited.

The visits lasted from three to five days, and there was also a variation in the number, names and nationalities of the visiting group participants. The agenda generally comprised three different elements, namely:

- talks with ministerial authorities on educational matters in general terms,

- thoroughgoing and down-to-earth contact with the national project leaders and participants, and

- visits to classrooms and observations of classroom activities.

Separate reports on the findings and experiences gained in the different member countries have been handed in to the Secretariat here in Strasbourg and have subsequently been distributed to those immediately concerned. The reports of the first six countries to be visited have furnished a basis for the compilation of the final report, while the consolidated report, delivered last autumn, has been based on all the reports I have mentioned. All these reports, of course provide a more detailed picture than I can convey in this oral description of what has been done at national level, what is being done, and what is being planned, independently and with the help of the CDCC Project Group, to further the spread of foreign language learning according to a communicative approach.

As it so happens that I have had the pleasure of taking part in all the visits, in one as the host and in the rest as the rapporteur, may I be allowed to make a couple of summarising remarks?

I am confident that what the visitors have learnt during discussions with central authorities and local project leaders, and what we have seen practised in classrooms in the countries visited so far provides a safe basis for an overview of the experimentation now going on and varying in extent from "some hundred children in experimental classes to hundreds of thousands in the case of curricula reform". In the short summary of problems encountered I would not like to appear as a propagandist. I think we have seen enough of the sunny side of the street - the interest shown by governments, the enthusiasm with which teachers involved have embraced the new venture, and the increased motivation, confidence and spontaneity in handling the foreign medium evinced by many pupils - to make us firm in our belief that what is being done is worth doing. So I'll limit myself to listing a series of problems - problems already solved in some places, or problems tackled and yet to be solved - and I'll take care not to indulge in any sort of unwarranted criticism or undue praise. After all, we know the dedication of all these involved.

First of all it must be remembered that experimentation at a national level cannot be done in anything like a laboratory or clinical atmosphere. The communicative model has had to be incorporated into existing syllabi in primary and junior secondary education, and this has often necessitated a first phase of theoretical analysis and development. It has often been a question of trying to strike a fair balance between the threshold level model with its emphasis on the oral-aural, productive side of language

learning, and the content of existing national language syllabi, built very often on structural lines with an emphasis on reading, writing and formal grammar. So hardly anywhere has the original threshold level document been taken over wholesale. There has been a national adaption, a process of selection of components and items. But it was testified everywhere that in this exacting process The Threshold Level had been one of the fundamental documents.

It is undeniable, on the other hand, that certain general trends in modern pedagogics have helped the introduction of the communicative concept. One is the tendency towards mixed ability classes and the call for "basic skills", a "core" curriculum and the definition of objectives attainable by all or most students, the "mastery learning" notion if you will. The growing attention given to the problems of weak or slow learners, and under-achievers is of course important in this connection, and a few of the major projects going on at present are explicitly focused on this latter category. In passing I must mention that this gave rise to an early misunderstanding implying that the communicative approach was meant and suitable solely for weak pupils but no use for abler students - of course no one believes that any longer.

Other recent trends favouring the innovation of language learning are the changing role of the teacher, new classroom working forms with group work periods and pair or partner work, students' independent work and self-assessment of the work done, and finally the increased opportunities for the students to have a say in the matter of syllabic content. Actually it is explicitly stated in a couple of cases that the experimental syllabus was worked out in co-operation between planners and students.

This leaves the question of the impact of the new approach on classroom practice. I'll be very short here. It has been easy to find teachers willing to work along the new lines. Pupils we have talked to seemed to like the new type of work, and there are actually signs to show that increased motivation has led to a tendency for more pupils to keep their languages. Of course it is much too early to pretend that any sort of elaborate systematic new methodology has yet put its imprint on classroom work. Teachers still tend to fall back too much on the native language; testing and evaluation seem to present hard nuts to crack. The remedy for this is of course adequate basic teacher training and in-service courses for practising teachers. And the rate at which these measures can be implemented is evidently a question of money.

One problem - unforeseen to begin with by project groups and teachers in some quarters was the lack of material suitable for the new approach. The manuals and exercise books available were, naturally, based upon the traditional or structural model. Production was set in motion in many places, and today the following materials are or are being made available. In Austria: Ticket to Britain; in Hesse: UNIT 1-9; and in Scotland: Tour de France.

Efficient carrying through of a period of language instruction is contingent upon not only the written manual and the supplementary material the teacher can offer his students, but also the aids he has at his disposal. During our visits we saw a great variety in the equipment of language classrooms. The lack of a tape recorder will of course make it difficult to present authentic material and entertaining pieces of music, lack of premises will bar group work, and the lack of language laboratories - however doubtful their use may be - can impede efforts to differentiate teaching. But the quality of teaching does not appear invariably to hinge on classroom equipment.

With few exceptions, central authorities have shown a positive interest in efforts to improve motivation for and the efficacy of foreign-language teaching. This interest has been manifested by financial support - even in times of shrinking budgetary frames - by the provision of other resources and by personal contact with the projects. Yet it is not uncommon for project leaders and other persons involved in experimental activities to feel that they do not receive the support or interest which they desire or need from the authorities. Sometimes this seems to apply even to a project specifically commissioned by the authorities.

There are many possible reasons for this. One contributory cause may be that the persons most immediately responsible within the authority concerned know too little about the project and about its possible financial consequences. Those concerned ought to ask themselves the following questions: Have regular information contacts between sponsor and project management been included in planning, and how are they working out? Has the project description been made sufficiently concise and has reporting been adapted so that a non-specialist will be put clearly in the picture?

The project leader for his part should be entitled to expect a financing authority to apportion time for regular contacts which will facilitate the ongoing planning of the project. As stated earlier, this is already functioning highly satisfactorily in most quarters.

Future work within the projects was discussed at the last meeting of project leaders, and recommendations were framed concerning measures in three fields: materials development, evaluation and assessment, and teacher training.

Very briefly, one point ascertained concerning materials development was that a bridge is needed between theoretical CDCC documents and ongoing and future materials production. One pillar of this bridge would be an explanation and exemplification of didactic processes involved in materials design.

The meeting recommended the formation of a group of 2-3 members, one or two of whom should be members of pilot projects. All projects should be invited to contribute with their experiences in the area of materials development. The document should be addressed to both authors and teachers and suitable adaptations should be made available to students as well.

As to evaluation and assessment, the meeting recommended the preparation of a study:

(a) assembling the relevant information on ongoing work towards the development of tools for testing communicative ability;

(b) providing guidelines for the construction of formal tests of communicative ability with a high degree of objectivity to be used for the purpose of final assessment.

"It was also strongly recommended that after completion of this study, a meeting should be convened of representatives of examination boards or comparable institutions from various countries with a view to examining the study and determining possibilities of implementing its recommendations."

It was further recommended that a document be produced providing guidelines for the composition of intermediate assessment texts.

The June meeting finally recognised the need for project evaluation and concluded that for each project information should be sought with regard to the following three aspects:

1. The effect of the project in comparison with the earlier situation in the institution involved.

2. The effect of the project in comparison with the situation in comparable institutions not involved in it.

3. The effect of the project, particularly in terms of practical success - but bearing in mind any differences in objectives - in comparison with similar projects carried out in other countries.

In each case "effect of the project" should be investigated with regard to at least two major components:

1. Motivation (of learners and of teachers).

2. Communicative ability of the learners.

The meeting felt that since this evaluation is to be carried out on an international scale, the Council of Europe should be directly involved in it and provide the means of obtaining the relevant information. It recommended therefore:

(a) the composition of questionnaires aimed at assembling relevant information, preferably in a statistically analysable form;

(b) the development of an economical testing procedure for communicative ability;

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(c) the organisation of a programme of visits to the various experimental centres not only, as in the present Modern Languages Project, with a view to establishing and maintaining working contacts between the teams involved but also for the purpose of carrying out the evaluation referred to above. This evaluation will require the participation of a few experts from different countries who should be enabled to maintain regular contacts with the project teams involved and who duly take into account any differences in objectives, conditions and/or emphases in the various projects.

Teacher training is the subject of a special workshop in this Conference, but I cannot miss the opportunity of quoting the first lines from the recommendation concerning teacher training made by the June meeting, which I wholeheartedly endorse:

"It is in the nature of the communicative approach to foreign-language teaching that the teachers should be effective and pedagogically oriented communicators themselves.

It is therefore of the greatest importance that the foreign-language teacher should be able to use the target language in a communicative way, ie in such a way that he is able to initiate communicative situations in the classroom, assist the learners in finding their own learning goals and methods and create an atmosphere of readiness to encourage understanding and using the foreign language - even though comprehension is difficult and uttering/using the language a problem."

The conclusions of the working groups at the June meeting are to be found in the consolidated report on the interaction network of the school sector of the Modern Languages Project.

Before ending my talk I would like very shortly to bring up the means for strengthening foreign-language learning in schools. As I see it, in most countries it is unrealistic - desirable as they would be - to count on increased timetable allocations for foreign-language teaching. Our principal means of improving the return on foreign language studies must therefore be that of enhancing pupil awareness of the value of linguistic accomplishments - both to the pupils themselves and to the community - and improving the learning situation, with all that this implies. While on this subject, I cannot resist quoting one of the project leaders, whose answer to my question "What has been achieved so far?" included the following summary, which I would say speaks for all project leaders.

The project has led to:

1. "An improvement in the general attitude towards language learning of pupils.

2. Teachers have begun to define clearly their objectives in teaching languages, and to put into practice improved methods of classroom practice, which will enable them to achieve those objectives.

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3. Students feel and achieve tangible success earlier in their language learning process.

4. A communicative approach in the teaching and learning of languages is being developed.

5. Teachers' morale has been improved by enabling them to feel successful in teaching languages, especially to those who have tended to be less successful in acquiring language skills hitherto."

I believe that we are now in a very good position to achieve important progress in foreign-language learning during the eighties. The efforts we make now will influence the opportunities for young Europeans today to associate and co-operate across language boundaries during the 1980s and in the decades that lie ahead.